CIRCULATION
A CONVERSATION WITH
NISHAT AWAN

EURO—VISION is an art-led enquiry that explores the extractivist gaze of European institutions and its policies. The relationship between international relations, trade, economic policy and military operations come into focus through the lens of Critical Raw Materials. In 2008, the European Commission adopted the Critical Raw Materials Initiative, which defined a strategy for accessing resources viewed as imperative to the EU's subsistence. The criticality of resources is measured according to supply risk and economic importance. Policies are drawn up to ensure the continued availability of materials deemed critical. Such policies have led to agreements guiding the biological and geological exhaustion of the Global South. The current list, revised in 2020, includes 30 materials, including Silica, Cobalt Natural Rubber, Phosphate rock, and the newly added Lithium and Titanium.

HOW CAN WE UNDERSTAND EXTRACTION BEYOND THE REMOVAL AND DISPLACEMENT OF MINERALS—TO ENCOMPASS POLICIES, INTERNATIONAL TREATIES AND REGULATIONS THAT IMPOSE CONTROVERSIAL FORMS OF STEWARDSHIP OF NATURAL RESOURCES ON COMMUNITIES?

EURO—VISION focuses on the inscriptive operations of initiatives such as the establishment of Free Trade Zones (FTZs), fisheries partnerships agreements (FPAs), and de-risking investment tools like public-private partnerships (PPPs). In doing so, FRAUD proposes to consider these agreements through the lens of Critical Raw Materials, as well as to incorporate a wider set of 'materials', such as labour and fish(eries). We argue that the latter are managed as resources to be extracted, and that understanding them as critical raw materials as defined by governmental bodies helps to understand how their plunder is mobilised and institutionalised. More importantly, this framework enables us to look beyond these practices to the possibility of thinking and doing otherwise.

The following text is based on a conversation with Nishat Awan in the EURO—VISION podcast series.

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FRAUD In our last episode, we considered how institutions such as the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT) are managing the extinction of the bluefin tuna, which is emptying the seas and leading to the forced displacement of fisherfolk, namely, that are traditionally living from the wildlife in those seas. In this episode we consider how this resource depletion affects those communities, as well as the wider infrastructures of extraction which they are a part of. Together with Dr Nishat Awan, who leads the research project Topological Atlas[1] at TU Delft. Topological Atlas produces visual counter-geographies that combine digital mapping and storytelling techniques with a participative approach, attending to those who are at the margins of traditional geopolitical inquiry. Nishat, could you outline the research that you've been undertaking with Topological Atlas?

DR AWAN The research that we've been doing for the past few years investigates the relationship between technologies of border security, which of course includes the more obvious aspects such as walls, fences, drones and surveillance, but then also border security understood as bureaucracies that produce borders; such as systems of documentation and the legal landscape of the border, and then how all of these together produce a border landscape that includes the physical landscape, geography, environment and ecology. Also, it includes the experience of crossing borders for those who are doing this without the required papers, and that's really the point of view from which we are looking at the border. In terms of methods, we do a lot of field research, which means going to particular border spaces, talking to people and doing interviews, looking at what the border landscape is like, and understanding the livelihoods around the border.

As they are being securitised and fences and walls are being built, the people who live next to the border are of course almost always cross-border communities. Their lives are also being disrupted by these kinds of securitisation practices that are happening, ostensibly to stop the movement of people. We therefore combine

this sort of field research with digital methods of mapping and modelling, in order to challenge this sort of evidentiary urge that there is in maps and map-making. An obvious example here is the kind of migration maps that you see in the popular press, even in some academic research, with the arrows all pointing towards Europe. They ignore the kind of circulations that are happening in particular regions of the world, in Asia, or on the African continent.

We are trying to make maps that are looking from the point of view of communities that are at the border and the people who are crossing the border, but then also to acknowledge the fact that the border is produced through forms of fiction. Whether it's the fiction of the legal system (the idea of the fair legal system in Europe), or if we think in terms of mapping, then remote sensing technologies also produce the border. These technologies produce a certain kind of gaze, that for example removes local communities and those who are dependent on easily moving across borders for trade, for living, to see families, etc. As such, we are using mapping and modelling as a way to produce maps that don't erase these other inhabitations of the border.

The one thing I would also say here, is that in terms of understanding how the border relates to economies of extraction, if we think about migration, we know that the journeys of undocumented migration are not linear in the sense that they don't go from A to B, they never were. However, what's happening now is that the journeys have somehow become endless or never-ending, because migration has become a system of circulation. The racial production of contemporary borders is designed to keep people moving. I think it's important to say here that it's not necessarily about keeping people out, although this is clearly a very brutal part of the same system, but to keep people moving, a system of circulation that includes deportation regimes, precarious lives, and militarised borders, which work together to create a kind of global underclass. The work that we have been doing thinks about this economy of the extraction of migrant labour that is dependent upon this particular form of circulation or of unsettlement of certain lives, and then how this somehow intersects with another kind of circulation, the larger scale circulations of extractive economies, like those of resource extraction. The project that we've been doing is organised through a series of fieldwork sites. We've been following one route from Pakistan that also Afghan people use as well, from Pakistan towards Iran, through Turkey, and then towards Europe. I use the word "towards" advisedly, in the sense that most people never

make it to Europe. We know this. People stop along the way, they give up, they're deported, or they die unfortunately. This is why we felt that it was important to flip the perspective, and start from the places where people were really starting their journeys.

FRAUD We very much appreciate how this project also focuses on, for example, circulation rather than linear trajectory, because it emphasises how migration is a space of opportunity for extraction of labour, amongst other things. And these spaces of opportunity can only really be actualised through constant circulation. This then facilitates the extraction of labour from these populations that are moving, which is also articulated within the wider context of goods circulation. I was wondering if you could explain how resource extraction becomes foregrounded in the case you were describing.

DR AWAN Yes, one of the places where we've been working for the past three, four years, is in Pakistan. It's a city called Gwadar on the Arabian sea coast of Pakistan, very close to the Iranian border. The reason we've been working there is that it is part of this kind of migration route where different kinds of circulation come together. Firstly, a lot of people start in the Pakistani megacity of Karachi, which is on the Arabian sea coast, but more eastward, near the border with India, and then they go along the coast to Gwadar, from which they then cross the Iranian border. The Iranian border is around an hour-and-a-half drive away. But this is also a place where two different kinds of circulations coalesce. The other circulation is large-scale infrastructural logistical circulation. Gwadar is in fact part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that China is currently in the middle of producing. We could say that the Belt and Road Initiative (sometimes called the New Silk Road), is China's way of sort of reinstating the old Silk Road, through logistics, infrastructure, roads, rail, communications infrastructure, power plants, all sorts of things coming together to produce a landscape of power. I think that's the best way of describing it. The Belt and Road Initiative is a series of horizontal bands across the globe, and there are very few areas where there are vertical links between these bands. There is also for example a maritime Silk Road, and two kinds of northern land ones. The China-Pakistan economic corridor is one of the most important vertical links within the BRI. It starts in Kashgar, in the Xinjiang province of China, which is also where the Uighur population is, so we know about those atrocities

that are happening there, and then the China-Pakistan economic corridor ends in Gwadar, which has a deep sea port. In the last 20 years or so, the kind of developments that have been happening in Gwadar have really been focused on this Chinese-led development. Though the port was actually not built as part of the BRI, the deep sea port was there already. It was built because Gwadar has a naturally deep harbour, but even when the port was built 20 years ago, it was built in the prime breeding grounds for prawns. Gwadar is known for its very delicious prawns. Obviously the prawn stocks have been completely depleted because the port has been built on the breeding ground. However what's maybe more important is that on the one hand, of course by building the port, they have to dredge the sea floor all the time, which of course depletes fish stocks, but what's really important to think about here also, is that because the port has been built, because of the China-Pakistan economic corridor, there's a level of securitisation around the port and the sea as well. This has meant that not only are the fish stocks depleted, but the fisherfolk, the *mahigeer*, as we call them in Balochi, are not able to stay on the sea because the Pakistan navy is there telling them to move. They are telling them to move away from the port, so parts of the sea have been cordoned off. Then at the same time in Balochistan, in Gwadar, there's been this very particular kind of artisanal fishing: small scale boats that go out for the day or maybe for a couple of days, and then they come back. But since this kind of interest in Gwadar has grown through these large-scale development projects, large trawlers have appeared near the coast of Gwadar. Thus because of these large-scale fishing practices that are happening now with the trawlers, a way of life is being lost: the knowledge of the sea, the seasons, the fish, this is slowly being lost, because the fisherfolk can't make their livelihoods with fishing any more.

The other thing I wanted to mention here in terms of extraction was the other big livelihood in a place like Gwadar, which is through oil. The diesel that's coming in from Iran to Pakistan (as we know Iran is under US sanctions, so they can't sell their oil very much), comes across the land border on the back of pickup trucks, even on the back of small motorcycles, in these kinds of blue barrels. In Pakistan, and particularly in Gwadar, there is only one petrol station that is, let's say, the official petrol station, and it never has any petrol to sell. Everybody therefore uses the so-called grey market oil that's coming from Iran. And the whole region relies on this particular practice, from drivers, to mechanics,

to people who sell the oil, and people who use it. Yet because of the Chinese interest in the area, which has meant that the border has been highly securitised, the oil smuggling is also being stopped, and this has huge consequences for people living in that area. On the one hand the cross border population have families across the border that they now cannot visit, but also this kind of livelihood is being disrupted.

One thing I would add here is that in Pakistan, for a long time, a system of Rahdaari was in place. Rahdaari are small, essentially pieces of paper, that you can get if you are somebody who lives within I think 50 kilometres of the border. It means you can cross the border—both the Pakistan-Iran and the Pakistan-Afghanistan border without a passport or a visa. You can go for a few days, and come back. That system obviously in relation to Afghanistan was shut down after 9/11. In Balochistan it has still been going until quite recently, but because of the developments that are happening around CPEC and the securitisation of the border, the Rahdaari system has now been closed. This has massive consequences for the people living there because the only official border crossing between Pakistan and Iran is in the north of the very long border, and Gwadar's right at the south. So, there's a lot of other effects of this kind of resource extraction that are also coming into play in this area.

FRAUD This story of how livelihoods are dependent upon the oil extraction, the oil trade and the movement of oil, really echoes livelihood dependencies in, for example, the west coast of Africa. We discussed in previous episodes how the huge trawlers have nearly emptied the seas and how artisanal fishing becomes extremely difficult, which leads to the fishermen becoming dependent upon buying by-catch from the bigger trawlers that are ruining their catch. So there's this similar economy of becoming dependent on a wider circulation of goods and extraction, an interesting relationship between different parts of the globe happening in these contexts. This brings us to consider how this is part of a wider infrastructure of extraction. I think you've already talked about this in a way, but maybe if you have something to add about how this sits within the wider infrastructure of extraction through the mega port, the oil, and migration as an infrastructure of extraction?

DR AWAN The project follows the route from Pakistan towards Europe, and in the last year or so, we've started working also on the Iran-Turkey border, particularly near Lake Van, in the city of Van. Just north of that is where a lot of people cross into Turkey, and one of the things that was interesting for us when we went there, was that this particular border area was so similar to where we had been working in Gwadar. In terms of the fact that Gwadar is in the Balochistan province of Pakistan, which has been fighting for independence from Pakistan. There have been a few insurgencies, one that was brutally crushed by the Pakistani military quite recently, and in the area in Turkey where we are working there is the Kurdish question, thus similar political contexts. At the same time the landscape is quite similar, mountainous, dry, and then of course in Turkey, in that particular area, there was also oil smuggling from Iran. That's now more or less been stopped in that particular area, but there was a similar set up where people's livelihoods depended on this trade that has been stopped. So in many ways, if you look at that area of Turkey, we can see perhaps what might happen in Gwadar, if the trade is stopped. I think these infrastructures of extraction produce very similar geographies, very similar conditions, that people have to live with and cope with. In that sense working across these two spaces, we hope that we can find a way to connect communities across these spaces who are living through very similar conditions, and perhaps can learn from each other.

FRAUD Absolutely, and one of the things I thought would be interesting to discuss is how Topological Atlas is also invested in not simply modes of knowledge production, but also how this knowledge is represented. You spoke earlier about how you are also invested in a counter-narrative of the arrows flowing into Europe, as we know there is very little migration going towards Europe. More than 80% is going in other directions in the global south.[2] Part of this project is about debunking this myth but also in thinking about how to represent these different modes of knowledge and circulation. You've conducted workshops thinking about how to map these spaces in a way that takes these complexities into consideration, and also thinking about the fictions that are created with the bureaucratic apparatus that you mentioned, and thinking about how local knowledges and narratives may create a very different picture.

[2] de Haas, *The Myth of Invasion*.

A part of that is the non-modern ontologies that are modulating these narratives, as a mesh or as a backdrop to these spaces. Could you say a few words about how these non-modern ontologies are entangled within these shores and how you've been working with mapping or counter-mapping, to create a different image of these spaces, and I think image is not the right word here—maybe you could tell us what the right word would be, rather than creating "images" of these spaces.

DR AWAN Yes, we've been working with maps and map making and visual methods in all the work that we've been doing. I suppose one of the contradictions in this project is that when we're doing fieldwork, when we're doing research in a place like Gwadar, as you say there are different ontologies playing out (non-modern as you name them). In order to think with those ways of understanding place, we've been using maps, which, of course, have a colonial legacy. They have a particular top-down view, so we've been trying to see how we can use this in a more open way.

We've been working with this group called Lajverd, a non-profit group in Pakistan that we do a lot of our field research with. With this in mind, let me tell you a story. When we started our workshops, what we did is that we made a big tracing of the peninsula that Gwadar sits on—it's a hammerhead peninsula, so it has this very distinctive shape. With a black pen we marked it out. Then in every conversation we had with the fisherfolk or with others, around this particular piece of paper, it transpired that every mark that the fisherfolk especially made on that piece of paper questioned this big thick line that we had drawn. This kind of line between land and sea that we thought was the shape of the land was questioned. Whether it was to do with how the shoreline changed through different seasons, whether it was the fact that their stories would move across land and sea without really making a difference between them, which was a quite obvious thing that we understood, that we needed a different point of view here. But then also just when we were talking, things would come up, like the question of djinns. If we want to describe what djinns are in a modern ontology, we could say that djinns live in a parallel world, but for those of us who are from Muslim backgrounds, we know of djinns. Djinns live with us, they are here in the room with me now, so they are recognised in Islam, but they are actually based on older cosmologies, part of the folklore of each of the places where we talk about djinns. For example, a djinn in Egypt is very different

to a djinn in Pakistan. And so when we're speaking about the places that were important to the people we were discussing with, they would speak about the fact that in this tree a djinn lives and therefore this tree is important and certain kinds of things happen here, and so the kinds of maps which parcel off and cordon off land for the use of the port, or for certain kinds of developments, of course don't take into account the fact that this tree that looks like a little slightly dry twig, because it's on the coast, and it doesn't have huge leaves or anything like that, that that tree is incredibly important. At the same time, especially in the southern area of Pakistan, there are lots of shrines everywhere because saints are incredibly important. Hazrat Khizr, who is the saint of the sea, is really crucial in Gwadar of course, because people are always going to the sea to fish and so the saints often have something called a *baithak*. A *baithak* can be a little room, or a little place, but it's a place where the saint will come and visit. So, it is a place to make offerings, to sit and contemplate. These are incredibly important spaces, so one of the baithaks of Hazrat Khizr is actually in the area of the Gwadar port that has now been cordoned off. Even people from Pakistan, who live in the big cities, do not understand what a catastrophe this is for the people who live there. So it's these kinds of understandings of place that I think get edited out of the maps that we make. We've been doing a lot of these kinds of mapping, trying to understand those spaces that won't appear on Google Maps, that won't appear on official maps.

The other thing I wanted to say here was the slight contradiction in the project between these kinds of maps that we are making by hand and trying to understand the places that are important to the people we are speaking with and then our desire to use, essentially, digital mapping techniques. The reason for that is of course the border is produced through digital technologies, and so if we are talking about migration, borders and resource extraction, I don't think we can elide the digital. Somehow we need to work with and through the production of borders and space through digital technologies. To this effect, we've been working with a group called Atelier Cartographique in Brussels, with whom we are trying to make a digital mapping platform that does not use Google Maps or OpenStreetMap as a base. We are starting really from the database, from the categorisations that are hidden within database structures, to try and think what would be a kind of mapping of these areas that doesn't fit into the categorisations of the border regime. Let's see what happens with that, but it's literally starting with the database and going forward, and the mapping

platform that we are trying to make is essentially an archive. An archive that will have some of the maps that we've made with the *mahigeer* in Gwadar, and other maps that we have made. Hopefully through the platform you can navigate in particular ways to tell particular stories. It's definitely a platform that's led by stories and tries to break the given categorisations of mapping and digital mapping.

FRAUD I think it's really important how you are also working with this tension between the digital, that represents of course the ontology of the enlightenment, if we could speak of it in this way, with these non-modern ontologies. As you said earlier, these border securitisation technologies, through remote sensing, are themselves modulating the space which is also imbued with non-modern ontologies. These are entangled in a way that is impossible to separate now, and I think it's really important the way in which you are working to try and think about those tensions, and how to maybe work within that and also to create resources for people to be able to navigate those spaces differently. Thank you so much Nishat for speaking about Topological Atlas and this really important work.

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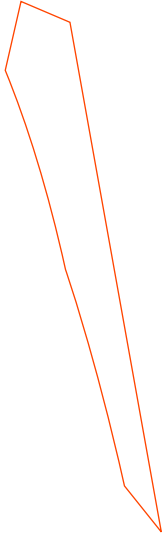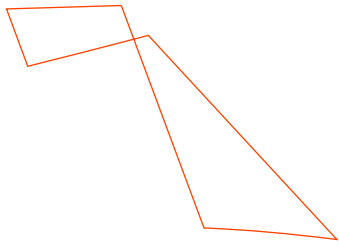
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FRAUD (Audrey Samson & Francisco Gallardo) is a London-based duo of artist/researchers which develop modes of art-led enquiry that examine the extractive gaze of the European Union's institutions and policies. Through their practice, FRAUD cultivate critical spatial literacy and cosmogony building. @la_fraud

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